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ROCK MUSIC PREVIEW

Blue Oyster Cult, cowbell going strong at 40

By Steve Knopper
Special to the Tribune

Of all the superstorm Sandy tragedies, the one suffered by Blue Oyster Cult was hardly the most devastating. But it is sad nonetheless. The hard-rock band best known for its cowbell-heavy 1976 hit "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" had planned in October to play two shows in New York for its 40th anniversary. Blue Oyster Cult paid to fly in old crew members and fan-club loyalists, and rehearsed for days. Patti Smith, the great punk poet and old friend of the band, was supposed to show up to collaborate. Then Sandy hit.

"They closed all the transportation into New York City, so the venue canceled the show. It turned out to be a big mess," says Eric Bloom, the band's lead singer, by phone from his Long Island home, which lost power for a week after the storm. "(Visitors) got stuck in New York and couldn't leave. People had already gotten out of town and couldn't afford to come back. There was no electricity south of 43rd Street in Manhattan."

But all was not lost, because BOC squeezed in an acoustic concert in Port Washington, N.Y., before the storm. (Smith, who had appeared on 1976's "The Revenge of Vera Gemini," showed up during the band's three-day rehearsal but was, because of the weather, unable to make the gig.) For a hard-rock band built for power and volume, the nuances of an acoustic show proved challenging.

"We changed the keys of several songs, changed the melodies of several songs, changed the tempos of several songs," Bloom says. "The audience – mostly hard-core (fans), I think – was pretty happy with hearing things so different.

Blue Oyster Cult is Eric Bloom, from left, Ritchie Castellano, Buck Dharma, Jules Radino (drummer) and Kasim Sulton.

When: 8:30 p.m. Saturday

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We are considering making an album based on what we played that day."

BOC's history begins in 1967, when it was playing Long Island clubs as a sort of glam-rock-and-early-metal hybrid. First called the Soft White Underbelly, then the Stalk-Forrest Group, it signed to the Doors' record label, Elektra.

At this point, the band abruptly replaced its lead singer with Bloom, prompting Elektra to bail out and the band to play covers for months at a hometown biker bar, essentially learning how to kick butt.

The band hooked up with Sandy Pearlman, manager, producer, poet and all-around Svengali, and in 1972 renamed itself Blue Oyster Cult. Its early albums on Columbia Records, reissued last year as part of the 17-disc "The Complete Albums Collection," show a mix of Black Sabbath and the MC5.

"What really made it for us was getting on a tour with Alice Cooper," Bloom says. "We were told if we did one gig with Alice and they were happy with us, we would do the rest of the tour. We hadn't really done that well live, so it was kind of trial by fire. I guess it all clicked at the right time."

By 1974's "Secret Treaties," the Cult was distinguishing itself with strong melodies and harmonies, a thudding rhythm section and long guitar solos. Then, just as the band was starting to get big, in 1978 it softened its sound for the enduring rock-radio smash "(Don't Fear) The Reaper." That hit has come to define BOC, partly due to a legendary 2000 "Saturday Night Live" skit in which Christopher Walken demands more cowbell from Will Ferrell. (Some fans would argue 1977's "Godzilla" was ultimately more influential, most obviously on '90s grunge bands such as Nirvana and Soundgarden.)

In liner notes to the boxed set, veteran garage-rock guitarist Lenny Kaye writes of the band's first albums: "The abstruse wordplay and imagistic sense of the forbidden gave the band a Woltzenschaaung that allowed them free imaginative rein, to spiral out into black hole improvisations and then plummet back to terra firma with bone-crunching schmographics."

So ... is that what the band was after? "My answer is yes," Bloom says.

Bloom, 68, passes a beat for deadpan effect, then elaborates: "I came from bar bands and playing cover songs, and being asked to sing in a band that was already rolling, I latched onto the whole aesthetic. You've got to remember, Sandy Pearlman is the mentor here, and he's the one that got everything going. Sandy was a poet, you know."

Pearlman's conceits (as well as those of his college friend, rock critic Richard Meltzer) were responsible for some of BOC's best work. Pearlman co-wrote early touchstones such as "Cities on Flame With Rock and Roll" and "Astronomy." He also pushed the band to stretch out in bizarrely pretentious ways, including 1988's "Imaginos," which contained absurdist material like "The Siege and Investiture of Baron von Frankenstein's Castle at Weisseria." All this, plus live albums, a performance of the Beatles' "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" recorded weeks after John Lennon's death in 1980 and other rarities, are included on the intimidatingly thorough "The Complete Albums Collection."

Bloom, a straight-ahead rock singer who has generally had a sort of grounding effect on the band, responds to a question about Blue Oyster Cult's history of literary ambitions by quoting a colleague, Gene Simmons of Kiss.

"He said to me one day, 'I don't know why you guys are doing what you're doing. The kids don't want to hear poetry,'" Bloom recalls. "Well, look where he is. Look where I am. Who knows, I hear he's worth $300 million."

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